

**RECORD OF THE PROCEEDINGS
SKAGIT COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
Wednesday, April 4, 2001**

9:00 a.m. – 10:00 a.m.

Discussion - Agricultural Land Lot Sizes and Land Use Issues.

The Skagit County Board of Commissioners met in regular session on Wednesday, April 4, 2001, with Commissioners Ted W. Anderson, Don Munks, and Ken Dahlstedt present.

DISCUSSION – AGRICULTURAL LAND LOT SIZES AND LAND USE ISSUES.

Marvin Omdahl, 16123 Field Road, Bow, thanked the Board for the opportunity to discuss the problems involving agriculture in Skagit County. He reviewed situations that affect agriculture that come from outside Skagit County, including farming under a supply management system offered by the Federal Government. When these programs failed, the Government would step in as a buyer of last resort. Mr. Omdahl stated that these programs both helped and hurt the agricultural business in Skagit County. In the dairy business, it created a profitable dairy business for many years. Mr. Omdahl stated that the terms today are globalization and “freedom to farm.” It means agriculture products will be produced in the area that can market them and produce them at the lowest cost. He stated that one of the results of that is the movement of dairy production out of the Midwest to the west coast. He spoke to the affects of things within Skagit County, including the exit of marketing agencies and canneries, and the resultant need to gain more efficiency and consolidation. He discussed the viability of continued agriculture in Skagit County. Mr. Omdahl forecast that there will be open fields this year, not planted in any crop, and that much acreage will be under-farmed, with the farmer knowing that he is not going to make any money. He commented on the need to decide what to do with this unused farmland, if it is not economically feasible for the farmer to farm. He stated that there is not consensus among the members of the agricultural community as to what should be done. Mr. Omdahl stated that this is a crisis that is occurring in slow motion.

John Sandell, a local farmer, discussed the requirements for 40-acre minimum lot sizes in the agricultural areas. He reviewed that years ago there used to be small farms. He commented on the lack of frozen food plants and canneries for large crops. He indicated that many people contact him about buying 5-10 acres so they can have a small farm. It was Mr. Sandell's opinion that such small farmers would take better care of the land and use less pesticides than the big farmers he rents to. He saw no reason why the County could not go back to 5-10 acre zoning in the agricultural areas. He commented on the soggy swamp-like conditions that exist on some of his land.

Rose Merritt, local orchardist, stated that since farming is no longer viable for many in the valley, such landowners should be allowed to subdivide their land and look to the future.

Jim Hinton, local farmer, stated that he never thought he would be in favor of breaking up large parcels or farms, but the buffer issue has made it difficult to profitably farm. He suggested that it might be better to divide the land and let the small farmers have their individual 5-10 acre farms. He commented on the long permit application periods that are required for dairy farmers. He stated that the Planning Department is making it difficult to get anything done on agricultural land.

Steve Sakuma, 17400 Cook Road, Burlington, reported that everyone agrees that farming is tough at this point in time, and that there have been good times in the past and will be in the future. He stressed the need to establish economic viability for agriculture. He stated, as a family, that is what they want, but how to get there is the question. He indicated that he was not in favor of changing the zoning to smaller lot sizes. He stated that such zoning may help people, but that it also hurts people that want to farm

RECORD OF THE PROCEEDINGS

Wednesday, April 4, 2001

Page #2

because it does not allow them the total opportunity to do so. He commented on the difficult decisions that would have to be made, and expressed his appreciation to the Board for this opportunity to discuss the situation. He reiterated that given the opportunity, his family would like to continue to farm, but when it is not economically viable, farming will not continue. Mr. Sakuma stated that this would not be resolved in the near future, but is an evolution of passing farming on to the next generation. He stated that the farming community wants to participate in such discussions and decisions, as it is their destiny and their family's destiny.

Jerry Nelson, 15890 Josh Wilson Road, Burlington, thanked the Board for allowing this discussion session today, and also commented on the public hearing the previous evening. He indicated that last evening the discussion was about buffers, and that the implementation of such buffers would take away land from the farmers. Today's discussion is about chopping up such farms into 5 and 10 acre chunks that would certainly affect the viability of farming. He discussed the specifics of his family's farming operation. Mr. Nelson discussed that things do change, and that agriculture is tough everywhere at this point in time. However, change often presents opportunities. He indicated that once the land is chopped up into smaller pieces, opportunities will be gone. He discussed the need to leave something of value to the next generation. He urged the Board to keep protecting farmland, to remain positive, and to protect agricultural land for future opportunities.

Jack Wallace, 11163 Blue Heron Road, stated that he would be generally supportive of reducing the lot size to 5 acres. He indicated that there is land that is not prime farmland, and as the economy worsens, there should be flexible ways of utilizing clustering that would be more efficient and less of a burden on the agricultural community. Farmers are under all sorts of pressure, with restrictions on irrigation, buffers, and restrictions on traditional farming operations. Mr. Wallace stated that having a 40-acre minimum is not going to stop residential development as farmland gets so cheap that residential use is possible. Mr. Wallace stated that at many of the public hearings, people state that they are dissatisfied with the Growth Management Act, as there is nothing left in-between; it is all or nothing. This proposal would help fill that gap. Mr. Wallace stated that the Growth Management Act has taken a lot of the flexibility and local control away and has shifted that control to Olympia. He stressed the need to allow other choices for people in the valley that would all for some kind of use.

Bob Rose, Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland, commented on the great deal of frustration with the condition of the farming economy, and the need to keep large unencumbered agricultural lands viable. He spoke to the romance of the small farm, and that 5-acre farms will essentially be suburban development. He stated that there will be less tax dollars and consequences for that decision. He urged the Board not to make a short term decision that would forever jeopardize the long term. He discussed the need to maintain the long-term needs of agricultural production.

Dan Miller, Gardner Road, Burlington, stated that he was on a Citizens Advisory Committee and did not recommend to the Planning Department the 40-acre minimum lot size for agricultural lands. He stated that it was the County's Planning Department that came up with the 40-acre minimum. He spoke to the financial difficulties of farmers.

Chairman Anderson discussed his experiences in the decline of the timber industry in Skagit County. He stated that regardless of the division of issues and the size of farming and buffers and different dynamics, it is important that the farmers have respect for differences of opinion, but stay together as a group. He cautioned that if the farmers divide up, they would lose their effectiveness. He gave an example of a woman from Indiana serving with him on the NACO Public Lands Steering Committee and the difficulties that are occurring across the nation. He spoke to the effects of reducing lot sizes and the resultant difficulties with the Western Washington Growth Management Hearings Board. Chairman Anderson discussed the possibility of utilizing the County's CaRD ordinance. He stated that Jerry Nelson was

RECORD OF THE PROCEEDINGS

Wednesday, April 4, 2001

Page #3

absolutely correct that we are going through a transition at this point in time. He stressed the need to look at alternatives and weigh them carefully, with the ultimate goal of preserving the farmer. He suggested that perhaps an ad hoc committee could look at the economics of varied lot sizes and long-range forecasts to assist in this regard.

Commissioner Dahlstedt expressed his appreciation for those attending this meeting. He stated that it is the Board's intention to communicate with the public and have them share their concerns on this and any other issue. He indicated that the previous evening the Board had heard from people who wanted to preserve every acre of farmland. He spoke to his experiences on the AgriLink Board and expressed that agriculture is difficult everywhere. Commissioner Dahlstedt stated that it is important for the Board to work with farmers and landowners to find some middle ground that will be acceptable to the growth management process. He spoke to the difficulties of the Board in defending challenges from all sides, and the constant flow of lawsuits against every decision made. He discussed the options of being creative to come up with programs that would work in this regard such as the transfer of development rights and other programs. He indicated that property rights are essential and the Board is going to do everything to protect them. He discussed the Board's recent visit to Olympia, and urged those in attendance to write letters to both the Governor and the County's legislators to express their concerns regarding these matters. He stressed that working together is the key.

Commissioner Munks discussed the mandate of Growth Management on each County in the State, and the lack of flexibility thereto. He reviewed his history in the agricultural industry, and assured those assembled of his commitment to assist in maintaining the economic feasibility of farming. He stated that everyone in the room most likely has a different idea of what should be done. He also stressed the need to save not only the farmland, but the farmer as well. He stated that farming is not a life anymore, it is a business, and that is the simple economics of the situation. He urged those present to talk to their legislators and to apply pressure for help to solve such problems.

Mr. Omdahl suggested perhaps a committee be set up of a group including these people and others to come forward with some commonality.

Commissioner Munks concurred with the idea of establishing a committee to talk about the diverse ideas presented during the last few days. He stated that this is not something that can be resolved in the next 60 days, but that change will gradually occur over the next few years.

ADJOURNMENT.

Chairman Anderson made a motion to adjourn the proceedings. Commissioner Munks seconded the motion and it passed unanimously.

**BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
SKAGIT COUNTY, WASHINGTON**

Ted W. Anderson, Chairman

Kenneth A. Dahlstedt, Commissioner

Don Munks, Commissioner

RECORD OF THE PROCEEDINGS
Wednesday, April 4, 2001
Page #4

ATTEST:

Patti J. Chambers, Clerk of the Board
Skagit County Board of Commissioners